

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

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INFO AMEMBASSY COLOMBO

AMEMBASSY DACCA

AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD

AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU

AMCONSUL BOMBAY

AMCONSUL CALCUTTA

AMCONSUL MADRAS

C O N F I D E N T I A L NEW DELHI 5002

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, IN

SUBJECT: MORARJI DESAI'S FAST ENDS - GUJARAT ELECTIONS CIRCA

JUNE 7

REF: NEW DELHI 4927

SUMMARY: MRS. GANDHI ACCEDED TO MORARJI DESAI'S DEMAND FOR EARLY ELECTIONS IN GUJARAT AND DESAI BROKE HIS FAST APRIL 13. THE PRESS AND POLITICIANS OF ALL PERSUASIONS GREETED THE TERMINATION OF THE FAST WITH A SIGH OF RELIEF. THE GUJARAT ELECTIONS WILL BE HELD AROUND JUNE 7 AND WILL BE THE FIRST MAJOR TEST OF ELECTORAL STRENGTH BETWEEN MRS. GANDHI'S CONGRESS PARTY AND THE CONSORTIUM OF NON-CPI OPPOSITION PARTIES SINCE THE J.P. MOVEMENT BEGAN EARLY LAST YEAR. END SUMMARY.

1. ON SUNDAY (APRIL 13) AFTERNOON, MRS. GANDHI SENT A PERSONAL LETTER TO MORARJI DESAI ACCEDED TO HIS DEMAND FOR EARLY ELECTIONS IN GUJARAT, THUS ENDING DESAI'S SEVEN-DAY-OLD FAST. IN

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HER LETTER, THE PRIME MINISTER REPEATED HER GOVERNMENT'S POSITION

THAT THE POSTPONEMENT OF THE GUJARAT ELECTIONS WAS NOT BASED ON "POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS," BUT ON THE IMPERATIVE TO DIRECT ALL OF THE STATE'S ADMINISTRATIVE ENERGIES AGAINST THE DROUGHT. REFERRING TO DESAI'S WORSENING CONDITION AND HER DESIRE SHARED BY HER COLLEAGUES TO SAVE "THE VALUABLE LIFE OF THE DISTINGUISHED FREEDOM FIGHTER," SHE ANNOUNCED THAT THE GUJARAT ELECTIONS WOULD BE HELD "AROUND JUNE 7."

2. MRS. GANDHI'S GESTURE HAS AT LEAST TEMPORARILY DISSIPATED A GRADUALLY RISING ATMOSPHERE OF TENSION AND CONFRONTATION THAT BUILT UP OVER THE PREVIOUS FOUR DAYS. THE NEWS MEDIA, UNDOUBTEDLY REFLECTING THE MOOD OF MOST INDIANS, HAS GREETED THE LIFTING OF THE FAST WITH SIGH OF RELIEF. AN ARRAY OF NATIONAL LEADERS AND POLITICIANS, INCLUDING J.O. NARAYAN, SHEIKH ABDULLAH, AND PROMINENT OPPOSITION LEADERS PUBLICLY WELCOMED THE NEWS. IN A BRIEF SPEECH TO CROWD OF WELL-WISHERS AND NEWSMEN ASSEMBLED AT HIS HOUSE AFTER THE ANNOUNCEMENT, DESAI THANKED THE PRIME MINISTER AND HER COLLEAGUES, FOR GRATING HIS DEMAND.

3. MRS. GANDHI'S DECISION TO ACCEDE WAS UNDOUBTEDLY BASED ON A NUMBER OF GRADUALLY INCREASING PRESSURES. THEY INCLUDED: A GENUINE DESIRE NOT TO ALLOW THE DEATH OF ONE OF THE MAIN PARTICIPANTS IN MODERN INDIAN HISTORY AND A LONGTIME PERSONAL ASSOCIATE; A GROWING NUMBER OF APPEALS FOR A COMPROMISE FROM WITHIN CONGRESS; THE REAL PROSPECTS FOR A RENEWAL OF VIOLENCE IN GUJARAT; AND A THREATENED POISONING OF THE ALREADY CONTENTIOUS POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE IN THE COUNTRY SHOULD DESAI DIE. THESE FACTORS REINFORCED THE PROBABLE CONCLUSION THAT IT WOULD BE BETTER TO PICK THE LESS DAMAGING OF HER TWO "NO WIN" OPTIONS SOONER RATHER THAN LATER. A NUMBER OF CONGRESS-R POLITICIANS, LED BY THE CHANDERSHAKER-KANT-DHARIA TRIO, MADE CALLS ON DESAI DURING THE CLOSING DAYS OF HIS FAST. ON APRIL 12 OVER FORTY CONGRESS MPS MET AT DHARIA'S DELHI HOME TO DISCUSS WAYS TO PRESERVE DESAI'S LIFE. REPORTEDLY, CONGRESS-R KINGPINS JAGJIVAN RAMN Y.B. CHAVAN AND SWARAN SINGH URGED COMPROMISE. A LEADING GUJARAT MP TOLD AN EMBASSY OFFICIAL EARLY APRIL 13 THAT GUJARAT CONGRESS-R MPS HAD PRIVATELY ASKED MRS. GANDHI TO AGREE TO AN EARLY POLL.

4. WE ANTICIPATE THAT THE CONCILIATORY ATMOSPHERE THAT HAS
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IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWED THE TERMINATION OF DESAI'S FAST WILL QUICKLY FADE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE UPCOMING ELECTIONS IN GUJARAT. THE GUJARAT ELECTIONS WILL BE THE FIRST REAL TEST OF CONGRESS' ELECTORAL STRENGTH SINCE J.P. NARAYAN BEGAN HIS MOVEMENT. A LITTLE OVER A YEAR AGO. THEY WILL ALSO PROVIDE NARAYAN WITH HIS FIRST BIG CHALLENGE IN FUSING THE EFFORTS OF A GROUP OF DISPARATE POLITICAL PARTIES IN A MAJOR ELECTION, AND IN MOBILIZING A GRASS ROOTS POLITICAL AWARENESS AND ENLIGHTENED PARTICIPATION

OF THE INDIAN ELECTORATE IN THE CANDIDATE SELECTION AND ELECTION PROCESSES.

5. IN A LETTER TO DESAI ON THE EVE OF HIS FAST, AND IN A NUMBER OF PUBLIC SPEECHES PRIOR TO APRIL 13, INCLUDING ONE ON APRIL 12, MRS. GANDHI FIRMLY REJECTED DESAI'S DEMAND. THE MINISTER HAS LOST SOME PRESTIGE IN YIELDING BUT WE DO NOT BELIEVE IT HAS SERIOUSLY DAMAGED HER POSITION. DESAI CAN CHALK UP A PERSONAL VICTORY, ONE THAT WILL ENHANCE HIS POSITION IN GUJARAT POLITICS. THE OPPOSITION CAN CREDIT ITSELF WITH A SMALL VICTORY, ONE THAT WILL REINFORCE ITS INITIATIVE IN THE INDIAN POLITICAL ARENA. MRS. GANDHI CAN ARGUE EFFECTIELY THAT SHE HAS SHOWN COMPASSION AND UNDERSTANDING, A COURSE WE SUSPECT SHE WOULD REJECT IF THE CHALLENGE TO HER AUTHORITY WERE FUNDAMENTAL. THIS TIME IT WAS NOT.

6. SEPTTEL ON GUJARAT ELECTIONS FOLLOWS.
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